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Adaptation privilege and Voluntary Buyouts: Perspectives on ethnocentrism in sea level rise relocation and retreat policies in the US

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ABSTRACT

The coast is a highly populated environment that is under increasing risk because of sea level rise (SLR) and climate change. Social science predicts that social and political systems will habitually privilege certain communities and disadvantage others under conditions of risk and disaster. This paper tests that supposition on a particular disaster policy in the United States. Voluntary buyouts are a policy tool in the US that has the potential to help communities adapt to SLR. While buyouts have been resisted in the past, there is some indication that they are becoming more politically popular. Despite increased popularity, communities in Alaska who need to relocate because of repetitive flooding and sea level rise do not meet the basic requirements of the buyout program in a way that makes this policy applicable to their situation. We find that notions of the market, property, and individualism are ideological assumptions inherent to the buyout policies, which ultimately serve to disadvantage tribal communities as they attempt to relocate as an adaptation strategy to climate change. This analysis suggests that adaptation policies to climate change themselves, can limit the inventory of possibilities that some communities have to choose from, and re-entrench inequity in the face of risk.

1. Introduction

The coast is a homeland for many people. Today, up to 1 billion people live near the sea (Hauer, 2017; Neumann et al., 2015), turning coastal zones into dynamic socio-ecological spaces in which communities establish cultural practices, infrastructure, economies, adaptation strategies, and unique human-ecological relationships with the ocean (Stocker and Kennedy, 2009). The lower-elevation coastal zone (LECZ), defined as "the contiguous area along the coast that is less than 10 m above sea level" (McGranahan et al., 2007), makes up less than 2 percent of the earth's landmass, yet holds up to 10 percent of the human population (McGranahan et al., 2007). Most of the world's megacities are located in the LECZ (Neumann et al., 2015). Between the years 1970–2000, the there was a net-population growth in coastal zones, despite the presence of coastal hazards (De Sherbinin et al., 2012); and population growth within these areas is increasing more than in non-coastal areas, and is expected to continue to do so in the future (Neumann et al., 2015). In other words, the coast is sacred, the coast is special, and while most coastal residents are likely to remain safe from disasters (Tacoli, 2009: 519), the coast also poses unique risks to human populations.

Under conditions of extreme climate change, coastal communities may particularly experience risk associated with sea level rise (SLR). SLR refers to the rise in global ocean levels due primarily to ocean expansion (Rahmstorf, 2007) and glacial melt (Rignot et al., 2011; DeConto and Pollard, 2016; Meier et al., 2007). Both phenomena are linked to anthropogenic climate change, the result of which creates new ecological norms for coastal communities to deal with and to which they must adapt. Sea level rise impacts are multifaceted and include submersion of coastal areas, increased erosion and groundwater intrusion (Nicholls and Cazenave, 2010), increased flooding, and greater storm surges, among others. Perhaps due to local experiences of change and risk, people who live closer to the ocean are more likely to believe in climate change, and more likely to support government efforts to reduce green house gas emissions (Milfont et al., 2014).

2. Reviewing vulnerability and adaptation: political "all the way through"

For human communities, SLR is primarily concerning on short and medium time frames because of an increased occurrence and/or a greater ferocity of natural hazards (storms, hurricanes, high water, erosion) (Temmerman et al., 2013), and the social consequences of these hazards, which social scientists understand as disasters (flooding, levee failure, lack of water, forced relocation). For several decades, social scientists have recognized that vulnerability to disaster, or the short and long-term suffering caused by disasters, is not predicated on proximity to the hazard, but rather on the socio-political and economic

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situatedness of the individuals and communities into which a natural hazard enters (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Marino, 2015; Faas, 2016 as a review). The socially-constructed vulnerabilities of people and communities often run systematically along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, race, and political status; and thus we can understand inequitable disaster outcomes (and negative outcomes of disaster policy) to be a form of oppression. Three fundamental questions for social scientists engaged in analyses of climate change and SLR, therefore, are: a) whether or not this theory of vulnerability is accurate in predicting who is more likely to be exposed to climate change and sea level rise-related disasters; b) whether or not the social systems which create vulnerability continue unabated today; and c) whether or not adaptation policies relieve or exacerbate these inequities.

Research suggests that theories of vulnerability do predict who is more likely to be exposed to negative climate change outcomes and disasters linked to SLR (Lazrus, 2012; Ribot, 2010; Marino, 2012, 2015; Cozzetto et al., 2013). In cases where communities are already experiencing risk or disasters related to climate change, researchers have shown that there are particular colonial histories, economic disadvantages, and political constraints that exacerbate and help create these risks. Emerging research also suggests that the social systems which create vulnerability continue today (Martinich et al., 2013). Martinich and colleagues have demonstrated that, particularly along the Gulf Coast, for example, social and economic class predicts who is most likely to flood because these are the communities who have the least engineering protection against high water. This suggests that it is not merely historical systems of oppression, but also contemporary ones, that create inequities to disaster. The last question posited above, namely, "do current adaptation policies relieve or exacerbate these inequities" has been less explored in the literature (for an exception, see special issue Marino and Ribot, 2012; Eriksen et al., 2015).

This paper examines one SLR adaptation strategy currently gaining momentum in the United States – Voluntary Buyouts – to understand how policies designed to protect from or adapt to SLR, and other coastal flooding events, exacerbate or relieve inequities in disaster outcomes. The United States is in some sense an anomalous context for examining policies regarding SLR because only 53% of the citizenry believes in anthropogenic climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2014); and the current administration has effectively refused to acknowledge climate change and SLR publically (Merica, 2017). However, disaster policies are reacting to SLR in discourses regarding repetitive flooding properties (Simon, 2017; Randolf, 2016); and federal agencies are making decisions regarding sea walls, beach nourishment, and other engineering solutions created to respond to flooding risks.

Specifically this paper responds to Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin's conceptual claim that adaptation is political "all the way through" (2015). By tracing a particular (not theoretical or conceptual) adaptation policy to SLR, and by identifying the underlying ideological assumptions inherent in that policy, we can begin to identify the political scaffolding of inequity that creates vulnerabilities among certain groups today and into the future. In other words, this article takes as a starting point the idea that adaptation is political from conception through to execution, and seeks to identify the ideological assumptions and contestations about risk, recovery, and economic rationality inherent in adaptation policies. To do so is to analyze where and whether disparities in outcome are linked to disparities in the subjectivities and ideologies of adaptation policy creation itself.

3. The Voluntary Buyout process

In the United States, the most realistic, existent political mechanism to fund relocations or retreat from SLR is a suite of policies around hazard mitigation and disaster relief that are collectively referred to as Voluntary Buyouts, which is shortened here to the vernacular: buyouts. Buyouts allow a property owner to "sell" property to the government through a political process that typically requires state, local, and federal participation. The process, as the name indicates, is voluntary and homeowners cannot be removed from their properties without consent. Following a buyout, the land acquired is converted into public green space and theoretically cannot be developed in the future.

Historically, buyouts have been an anomaly compared to other mechanisms of disaster relief and disaster spending. From 1993 to 2011 FEMA spent approximately $2 billion dollars to buy back 37,707 high-risk properties (Polefka, 2013), mostly along the Mississippi River. This $2 billion spent on buyouts pales in comparison to the $108 billion in property damage following Hurricane Katrina (Knabb et al., 2006), for example, or the $136 billion dollars reportedly spent on disaster relief from the years 2011–2013. Additionally, Liz Koslov notes that buyouts have also been rhetorically unpopular in the United States, especially with developers and politicians, who see developing waterfronts as key features of economic and social progress (Koslov, 2016: 375–379). This is true even when homeowners and neighborhood organizations petition for buyouts.

Since Hurricane Sandy, however, there has been increased attention to buyout processes, and indications that buyouts might be gaining in popularity. In New Jersey, the Hurricane Sandy Blue Acres Program spent $300 million in federal monies to buy approximately 1300 repetitive flooding properties (State of New Jersey, 2017). The Blue Acres Program has also been recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a National Best Practice (State of New Jersey, 2017), and may be looked to as a model, following the suite of hurricanes that hit the US Gulf Coast in 2017.

There is also evidence that buyouts are gaining popularity with decision-makers in Washington D.C. Perhaps surprisingly, buyouts have been relatively apolitical compared with other climate change legislation. For those people who "believe in climate change" buyouts are recognized as a mechanism for climate change adaptations and a response to SLR; but in June 2017 the finance house committee passed a bipartisan bill that, in part, encouraged buyouts (and other forms of mitigation) for over 150,000 properties in the United States that are subject to repetitive flooding. Justification for the bill noted that "FEMA estimates that while these properties comprise just one percent of those insured by the NFIP, they represent 25 to 30 percent of all flood claims" (Simpson, 2017). Notably, the bill requires that communities who have repetitive-flooding properties demonstrate hazard mitigation reforms, or run the risk of losing coverage by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), a federally-run program in the US. The risk of losing flooding insurance can, arguably, be read as an incentive to accept buyouts. In another example of increased popularity, Harris County, the county that houses the city of Houston, Texas, called immediately for buyouts in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Also in the aftermath of the storm, FEMA produced a report entitled, "Buyouts a Win–Win for Harris County and Residents" (FEMA, 2017).

For climate change researchers, the increased attention to buyouts offers great hope for a partial solution to SLR even in the political context of climate change denial. The concern, stemming from the social science literature on disaster, is that if suddenly these policies are deployed on a large scale – they may have the unintentional consequence of privileging some communities and individuals at risk, while ignoring others. In other words, does this adaptation policy re-entrench or relieve inequity?

4. Who's missing?: a critique of ethnocentrism and white privilege in adaptation policies

I have worked in and with the community of Shishmaref, Alaska for over 10 years (some years more than others), trying to understand, with the help of my colleagues and friends who live there, how and why climate change is affecting this community (Marino, 2012, 2015). Sometimes called the "poster child for climate change" in the popular press (Sheppard, 2014), Shishmaref and other communities in Alaska – notably, Newtok – have voted to relocate because advancing erosion

(USGAO, 2009), the increased ferocity of storms (Hinzman et al., 2005), and SLR make long-term sustainability in place risky. Given the repetition of flooding disasters (Kinsman et al., 2013), and the demonstrable desire on the part of communities to relocate (Marino, 2015), why has FEMA not produced a report titled: "Buyouts, A Win–Win for Shishmaref and Residents"?

Buyouts do not work for the Alaska communities who need to relocate. In personal communication with agency workers, I have learned that buyouts have indeed been investigated as a strategy for relocation funding in Alaska, but that buyouts are policies not written or deployed in ways that are easily applicable to these situations. To understand this disparity, it is critical to analyze the requirements and ideological presuppositions that underpin buyouts.

First, buyouts only apply to homeowners. If someone rents a house or is living in a home but does not have established property rights, buyouts do not apply. Buyout prices are predicated on pre-storm market value. In Alaska, market value is a challenge to establish because of extreme remoteness and the relative lack of a functioning real estate market in these communities. Even in cases where market value may be determined, it is often not possible to reconstruct a house from scratch in the Arctic or sub-Arctic based on the market value assigned. Finally, and most critically, buyouts were not designed to relocate communities as a whole. In Staten Island, for example, buyouts incentivized relocations within New York City (Koslov, 2016), but neighbors-staying-next-to-neighbors was not a policy priority. In Shishmaref, an *Iñupiat* tribal community, the collective relocation of family groups, together and within traditional subsistence territory, is an absolute, non-negotiable priority for most people.

Thus we see that buyouts are predicated on the establishment of market value, and can disadvantage individuals who need to adapt but do not own a home, or tribal communities who need to remain together and in relationship to a larger geographical space. As a general principal, then: *market value* (i.e. capitalism), *property*, and *individualism* are the underpinnings of buyouts. It is not circumstantial that these principals are also fundamental to the construction of whiteness, and a Euro-centric worldview.

Property has long been discussed as a foundational principle of race and whiteness (Harris, 1993), and has a particularly pernicious history among settlers, colonizers, and Indigenous peoples in the United States (Tsosie, 2000). The "market" as the only recognizable mechanism to establish real value has also been critiqued at length by Indigenous scholars and allies as a particularly imposed and ethnocentric way to understand the natural world, as well as the built environment (Whyte, 2017). Individualism, and the nuclear family as the seat of decision-making power, is likewise a foundational principal of patriarchal, white America that does not so easily map onto all homes and communities (Sear, 2016); and can act as a colonial tool to undermine the real needs for tribal communities to act collectively.

There are two ideas most striking, for me, within an analysis of the inadequacies of buyouts to serve communities in Alaska. First, is the flimsy but persistent insistence that economic rationality underlies buyout decision-making. This justification is articulated in the federal requirement that: "The property's purchase must be cost beneficial. A property is considered cost beneficial if the cost of acquiring and demolishing the property is less than the cost of the estimated future flood damages to the property" (Harris County Flood District, 2017). Cost is determined by the home's pre-storm market value. Under this rationality, the federal government (in conjunction with state and local governments) may very well *give the most money to the wealthiest families* as a practice of climate change adaptation; instead of giving the most money to the most at-risk, conceived of in the literature as the most vulnerable. Connected to this is the second point, that *buyout policies do not necessarily address the protection of people, but rather the cost and protection of flooded property.*

5. Discussion: the inventories of possibility and adaptation privilege

There are complexities surrounding buyouts, race, vulnerability, and privilege that are not so easily reduced. Liz Koslov points out that middle class homeowners in some neighborhoods in Staten Island had to band together through grassroots organization to get governments to recognize their risk and their desires for buyouts (Koslov, 2016). Buyouts for Staten Islanders were not easy, even when possible. Likewise, Indigenous communities in Alaska have actively and successfully recruited and lobbied for increased public and international attention, so that instead of being "victims" of colonial infrastructure and climate change events they are instead active, resilient, and politically powerful actors who might very well set precedent that will protect other, non-Indigenous communities. Politicians have responded to these efforts. President Obama visted Alaska; the late Senator Ted Stevens, Senator Lisa Murkowski, and a host of other politicians have all visited Shishmaref in an attempt to understand and respond to community needs.

The way policies are written, however, and the underlying assumptions therein, affect the inventories of possibility that communities have to choose from when faced with risk. I suggest through this analysis, that if adaptation policies are bound up with white, colonial notions of property, individuality, and market value, then those communities who choose not to organize, or cannot organize, around these principles will be limited in their political options. The limitation of adaptation options, or the limits in inventories of political possibilities, when faced with risk is what I am calling *adaptation oppression*. Wider scopes of possibility, possibilities available to communities whose organizational principals may more easily line up with the principals that underlie disaster and adaptation policies, may be thought of as *adaptation privilege*. These concepts need to be further sketched out within the disaster and climate change literature, in conjunction with affected communities, but they are presented here in part because of the immediacy of need in understanding and deconstructing adaptation and disaster policies such as buyouts.

Striking for social science researchers now is that buyouts have just begun to roll out. If this analysis holds true across communities, then social science researchers must be prepared to address and understand the implications of underlying assumptions in climate change adaptation policies, or those policies themselves will re-entrench inequity. What happens to renters in Houston, millionaires in Miami, or tribal communities along the Gulf Coast and in Alaska over the next twenty years will be the real test of who retreat and relocation policies actually protect.

In the end, this paper is also a call to diversify the assumptions that underlie policy creation itself. This may include realizing that notions of property are unusually, and perhaps problematically, central to disaster policies in the United States. It may include operationalizing adaptation plans that are grounded in collectivism and community instead of individualism and the nuclear family. It may mean making a tribal exception for buyouts that allow Indigenous Americans to reassert alternative ways to assess value, relationships, and protocols for action (Whyte et al., 2016). Thus we point to the future of climate change social science research as an attempt to identify the subjectivities that underlie adaptation policy, and work towards the diversification of adaptation conceptual and policy frameworks. Allowing for ideological multiplicity in policy development, perhaps more than any infusion of money or planning, might allow us the greatest inventories of possibility; and it may allow us to imagine more broadly a liveable future for people who call the coast home.

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